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Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 NEAE-00 SSO-00 NSCE-00 USIE-00 INRE-00
CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05
PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 AID-05 PC-01 IO-13 DHA-02
/071 W
----------181308Z 108087 /53
O P 181145Z MAR 77
FM AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIALA 422
INFO AMEMBASSY DACCA PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY TEHRAN PRIORITY
AMCONSUL KARACHI PRIORITY
AMCONSUL LAHORE PRIORITY
CINCPAC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 ISLAMABAD 2663

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PK
SUBJECT: BHUTTO CRACKS DOWN ON OPPOSITION

SUMMARY: MOST MAJOR PNA LEADERS WERE ARRESTED EVENING MARCH 17 AND STILL BEING HELD. LATEST STAGE IN CONFRONTATION FOLLOWS ASGHAR KHAN STATEMENT AFTERNOON MARCH 17 THAT THE PNA STILL REFUSED TO HAVE DIALOGUE WITH PM AND THAT OPPOSITION WOULD TAKE OUT LARGE PROCESSIONS MARCH 18. IN VIEW OF PNA REJECTION OF TALKS AND PLANS FOR DEMONSTRATIONS TODAY, PM ORDERED ARREST OF ASGHAR KHAN, MAHMUD ALI KASURI, SHERBAZ MAZARI, BEGUM WALI KHAN AND SEVERAL OTHERS. MUFTI MEHMUD WAS ARRESTED FOLLOWING AFTERNOON PRAYERS ON THE 18TH.

IT IS NOT YET CLEAR WHETHER THE GOVERNMENT INTENDS TO KEEP PNA
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LEADERS JAILED FOR AN EXTENDED PERIOD. BHUTTO HAS ATTEMPTED TO PROJECT IMAGE OF CONTROLLING THE SITUATION AND LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE BY CALLING FOR NATIONAL ASSEMBLY TO MEET ON MARCH 26 AND FOR SCHOOLS TO REOPEN MARCH 28. ABSENCE OF CONGRATULATORY MESSAGE FROM PRESIDENT CARTER TOPIC OF CONVERSATION AMONG POL-ITICALLY AWARE URBAN MIDDLE AND UPPER CLASSES. CENTRAL QUESTION NOW FACING BOTH BHUTTO AND PNA IS HOW PUBLIC WILL REACT TO

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PM'S CALCULATED POLITICAL RISK. END SUMMARY.

1. CONFRONTATION BETWEEN PRIMSSMINISTER AND PNA HAS TAKEN NEW TURN WITH BHUTTO, ON MARCH 17, ORDERING ARREST OF MOST MAJOR PNA LEADERS, INCLUDING ASGHAR KHAN, AND ANNOUNCING THE OPENING OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ON THE 26TH AND SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES ON THE 28TH. OUR INITIAL ASSESSMENT IS THAT PM HAS OPTED FOR COMBINATION OF (1) TOUGH CRACK-DOWN ON OPPOSITION AND (2) APPEARANCE OF CONFIDENCE IN HIS CONTROL IN THE COUNTRY.

2. LATEST STAGE IN CONFRONTATION BEGAN WITH ASGHAR KHAN'S MEETING WITH LAHORE HIGH COURT BAR ASSOCIATION AFTERNOON MARCH 17, DURING MEETING, THE RETIRED AIR MARSHAL SAID THAT PNA WOULD REJECT THE PM'S SECOND LETTER TO MUFTI MEHMUD, WHICH WAS NOT SUBSTANTIALLY DIFFERENT FROM FIRST LETTER WHICH OFFERED A DIALOGUE. ASGHAR ALSO SAID THAT UNLESS BHUTTO AGREED WITH MAIN PNA DEMAND - NEW NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS SUPERVISED BY JUDICIARY AND ARMY - THERE WAS NOTHING TO TALK ABOUT. HE ADDED HE WOULD LEAD LARGE PROCESSION IN LAHORE TODAY FOLLOWING AFTER-NOON PRAYERS. WE UNDERSTAND PNA HAD ALSO SCHEDULED LARGE PROCESS-IONS IN ALL OTHER MAJOR CITIES AT SAME TIME.

3. WE BELIEVE THAT IN LIGHT OF ASGHAR KHAN'S UNEQUIVOCAL REJECT-ION OF TALKS WITH THE PM AND THE PLANS FOR LARGE-SCALE PNA DEMONSTRATIONS TODAY, BHUTTO DECIDED IT WAS TIME TO TAKE FIRMER ACTION AGAINST THE OPPOSITION. YESTERDAY EVENING ASGHAR KHAN AND ABOUT 20 OF HIS COLLEAGUES WERE DINING AT A LAHORE RESTAURANT WHEN POLICE ENTERED AN ARRESTED THE AIR MARSHAL. KHURSHID KASURI (A PNA CANDIDATE FOR A LAHORE NA SEAT), MAHMUD ALI KASURI
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(KHURSHID'S FATHER, TEHRIQ FORMER MNA AND A PNA LEADER). ARRESTED BUT LATER RELEASED WERE ADVOCATE M. ANWAR (ONE OF LEADING OPPOSITION LAWYERS) AND SEVERAL OTHER PNA STALWARTS. ACCORDING TO CONGEN LAHORE, THE POLICE DID NOT HAVE A WARRANT FQR ASGHAR KHAN'S ARREST.

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AMCONSUL LAHORE PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 ISLAMABAD 2663

4. EVENTS IN LAHORE WERE MIRRORED ELSEWHERE IN THE COUNTRY. ALSO ARRESTED LAST NIGHT AND REPORTEDLY STILL HELD WERE BEGUM WALI KHAN, SHAH AHMED NOORANI AND SHERBAZ MAZARI. WE UNDERSTAND ONLY REMAINING PNA LEADERS STILL FREE ARJI FEWI MEHMUD (SEE PARA 11)-WHO IS SCHEDULED TO LEADE PRO-CESSION IN PESHAWAR TODAY-AND PNA SECRETARY GENERAL GHAFOOR AHMED. PROFESSOR GHAFOOR HAS SCHEDULED A PRESS CONFERENCE IN LAHORE TODAY.

5. IT IS NOT CLEAR YET WHETHER THE GOVERNMENT INTENDS TO KEEP THE PNA LEADERS UNDER DETENTION FOR AN EXTENDED PERIOD. SOME OBSERVERS BELIEVE IT MAY RELEASE THEM ONCE THE OPPORTUNITY A PAKISTAN FRIDAY PRESENTS FOR MOSQUE-BASED POLITICAL ACTIVITY IS OVER. (THE PNA HAD, OF COURSE, PUBLICLY ANNOUNCED THEY WOULD TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THIS OPPORTUNITY AND PLANNED TO TAKE OUT PROCESSIONS FOLLOWING THE WIDELY ATTENDED EARLY AFTERNOON PRAYERS.) GOP DECISION CONFIDENTIAL

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MAY DEPEND ON TODAY'S EVENTS.

6. CRACK-DOWN ON OPPOSITION HAS BEEN COMBINED WITH BHUTTO TAKING STEPS DESIGNED TO SHOW HIS CONFIDENCE IN HIS CONTROL OVER THE COUNTRY AND HIS ABILITY TO MOVE AHEAD. THE PRESIDENT HAS SUMMONED THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY TO MEET AT 10 A.M. ON MARCH 26 AND HAS SAID THAT OATH-TAKING BY NEW MEMBERS WILL BE THE FIRST ITEM OF BUSINESS. THE PUNJAB AND SIND GOVERNMENTS HAVE ANNOUNCED THAT SCHOOLS CLOSED SINCE THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN WILL REOPEN MARCH 28.

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7. PORCESSIONS WERE TAKEN OUT IN NUMEROUS CITIES AND TOWNS ALL OVER PAKISTAN YESTERDAY. THERE WERE POLICE FIRINGS IN KARACHI AND LAHORE, BUT IN BOTH THESE KEY CITIES PITCH OF CONFRONTATION SEEMED LOWER THAN DAY BEFORE. IN KARACHI, FOR FIRST TIME ARMY PLAYED MEDIATION ROLE AND NEGOTIATED POLICE DISENGAGEMENT FROM CONFRONTATION WITH TEENAGERS IN THE CITY. IN RETURN, YOUTHS ENDED PROCESSION.

8. AMONG POLITICALLY AWARE URBAN MIDDLE AND UPPER CLASS, THE US HAS FIGURED IN THE CURRENT IMBROGLIO AT LEAST TANGENTIALLY. BOTH PPP AND PNA REPS TOLD CONGEN OFFICER AND VISITING EMBOFF IN LAHORE MARCH 17 THAT LACK OF CONGRATULATORY MESSAGE FROM PRESIDENT CARTER, PLUS OTHER MAJOR WORLD LEADERS, HAS BEEN NOTED. PPP REPS WONDERED IF IT WAS SIGNAL THAT THE AMERICAN ADMINISTRATION WAS "NOT RECOGNIZING" PM. A PPP MNA-ELECT ALSO TOLD US OPPOSITION IS SPREADING STORY US IS VERY UNHAPPY WITH PM AND HIS ELECTION TACTICS AND WITHHOLDING OF MESSAGE IS PROOF OF OUR DISPLEASURE. IN ISLAMABAD WHERE WE HAVE HAD MANY INFORMAL QUERIES ABOUT ABSENCE OF MESSAGE, JANG RESIDENT EDITOR TOLD US MANY PEOPLE SEE THIS IN CONTEXT OF NEW US ADMINISTRATION'S STRESS ON MORALITY IN FOREIGN POLICY. (EMBASSY STILL BELIEVES THAT MOST APPROPRIATE TIME TO SEND MESSAGE WOULD BE WHEN BHUTTO IS SWORN IN FOR NEW TERM AS CONFIDENTIAL

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PRIME MINISTER FOLLOWING CONVENING OF NATIONAL ASSEMBLY. THIS IS DECISION EC-9 SEEMS TO HAVE MADE AS WELL.)

9. SOME OBSERVERS IN LAHORE BELIEVE PM HAS GIVEN ONE LAST SIGNAL TO PNA TO NEGOTIATE OR FACE CONTINUED INCARCERATION. WE BELIEVE, HOWEVER, THAT IF ANYTHING, THE PM'S MOVES WILL HARDEN THE OPPOSITION'S RESOLVE TO CONTINUE ITS STRATEGY.

10. CENTRAL QUESTION NOW FACING PNA AND BHUTTO IS HOW WILL PUBLIC REACT TO THE PM'S ACTIONS. ONE INDICATION WILL BE RESPONSE TO TODAY'S CALL FOR PROCESSIONS IN ALL MAJOR CITIES. LACKING THE PNA LEADERSHIP, WE WOULD ASSUME THE PROCESSIONS WILL BE SMALLER THAN OTHERWISE EXPECTED. THEY MAY ALSO BE MORE VIOLENT THAN HAD RESPONSIBLE SENIOR LEADERS BEEN IN CHARGE. IF OPPOSITION STILL ABLE TO GENERATE ENTHUSIASTIC AND LARGE GATHERINGS, EVEN WITH MUCH OF ITS LEADERSHIP IN JAIL, IT WOULD BE AN UNWELCOME OMEN FOR BHUTTO. WE ASSUME MOST LIKELY COURSE OPEN TO PNA (AND PNA RESPONSE UNDOUBTEDLY WILL BE GIVEN AT PROFESSOR GHAFOOR'S PRESS CONFERENCE TODAY) WOULD BE CONTINUATION OF MARCHES AND PROCESSIONS IN ATTEMPT TO INCREASE PRESSURE ON GOVERNMENT. WHETHER BHUTTO'S TACTICS WILL BE SUFFICIENT TO EVENTUALLY END THE PNA CHALLENGE TO HIS AUTHORITY OR WHETHER THEY WILL BACKFIRE AGAINST HIM REMAIN TO BE SEEN. HE HAS TAKEN

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CALCULATED POLITICAL RISK AND WE CANNOT YET PREDICT OUTCOME.

11. LATE WORD FROM CONSULATE PESHAWAR IS THAT PNA LEADER MUFTI MEHMUD WAS ARRESTED AT 1430 THIS AFTERNOON AS HE WAS PREPARING TO LEADE PROCESSION FOLLOWING AFTERNOON PRAYERS. PESHAWAR UNDERSTANDS HE IS STILL DETAINED.
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Message Attributes

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Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
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To: STATE
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vdkvgwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/d30ceeb5-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
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